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SUBJECT: NATIONAL ASSEMBLY OPENS SESSION AS PEACEFUL LAND PROTESTS
CONTINUE IN HANOI

1.(SBU) Summary: Vietnam's newly-elected National Assembly (NA) opened its twelfth five-year session on July 19. The NA session is expected to approve a variety of personnel changes and a reorganization of the government, which would reduce the number of ministries. Citizens protesting grievances - many related to land grabs by local power holders - have chosen to highlight their complaints by staging small demonstrations near the National Assembly site or in front of government offices. Plainclothes and uniformed security personnel were deployed at the unofficial "protest square" near the Assembly building before the NA session opened, but we have received no reports that demonstrators have been forcibly dispersed and some protests continue here. Septel reports that authorities have moved to break up similar, but larger, protests in Ho Chi Minh City. End summary.

2.(SBU) With his diplomatic colleagues, the Ambassador attended the opening of the 12th five-year session of the National Assembly on the morning of July 19. This formal meeting featured predictably long speeches by government leaders praising Vietnam's recent accomplishments. While no new ground was broken in the opening session, over the next week and a half the new NA is expected to smoothly confirm the consolidation of some ministries and extensive leadership changes. Press reports, including some in the official media, indicate that additional deputy prime minister positions may be created, while four ministries will be merged with others. Among those rumored to be stepping down in the reshuffle is the Minister of Justice. American-educated Minister of Education and Training Nguyen Thien Nhan is expected to assume one of the new DPM positions.

3.(SBU) In recent years, small numbers of disgruntled citizens, usually from the same local area, have taken advantage of "political events" such as the convening of NA meetings to stage protests in Hanoi near the NA building or in front of the Ministry of Justice. Government officials often tolerate these protests. Police were present in greater numbers than usual in advance of the NA opening this morning, but about 25 petitioners were gathered in a small corner of the Mai Xuan Thuong park, Hanoi's unofficial "protest square," this afternoon, accompanied by about 50-60 plainclothes and uniformed police, who maintained full control of the area.

4.(SBU) Comment: The strong police presence in Hanoi's protest square reflects the GVN's determination not to tolerate any disruption to the NA session. Some determined protesters here have nonetheless been able to stay on the streets, unlike the more confrontational situation that has developed in Ho Chi Minh City. Of course, the dynamics of each protest are different. Groups often tend to be made up of "apolitical" elderly persons, and the government often attempts to facilitate mediation efforts with officials of their area of origin. The government watches closely for signs that protesters are organizing broader-scale coalitions or "plotting" to link with others. There are explicit indications that

Hanoi is leaning on provincial government officials to prevent and resolve issues at the local level. As in the south of the country, however, there are many incidents of citizens being dispossessed of land as local power holders and corrupt officials move to gain economic advantage. In a nation that lacks representative mechanisms, many citizens are driven to action. Most know that, while sending a grandmother to Hanoi may be allowed, more active, coordinated efforts can land one in jail.

6.(U) This cable was coordinated with Consulate Ho Chi Minh City.

MARINE